

PROLOGUE / THE QUEST

Praise be to God, the First-Last Reality and Lord of the Worlds; the Friend of Seekers and Opener of Hearts. Praise be to Him Who befriended me and saved me from this *Dunya*: the space-age world of hypnotic-phenomenal distraction and technological bedazzlement. Praise be to Him Who brings the seeker to surrender: another name for self-confrontation, the name of the game which really is not a game. Surrender: a Seeker's first step in search of self: a giant-step, baby-step — neither yet both, and learning to walk is sometimes scary.

It was years ago, that yesterday when I moved towards my challenge. Inside a humble urban building converted to a mosque, it happened. I had come only to observe, at the invitation of friends. There were many empty seats: the teacher stood before a class of two. I quietly took a seat next to one of those already present, an old woman whom I later learned was Sister Majeed. I looked at the teacher, a bearded old man — a story unto himself, whom they called the *Imam* (religious leader). I surveyed the room: cracked ceilings, old fixtures, linoleum floors, home-made blackboards, and the wall behind the teacher — on which there was some writing. The writing was extraordinarily beautiful and very intricately painted. It fully dominated the wall and my attention as well. It resonated peace and was strangely familiar, yet I could not begin to decipher it. It held my interest for the entire length of the talk. Overcome by curiosity, I whispered a question to the old woman at my side:

'Ma'am, what is that?'

Turning a wisdom-worn face towards mine so full of youth, she looked at me with knowing eyes and said:

'It is the *outermost* out and the *innermost* in. Keep your eyes on that.'

In that moment, as her words fell on my ears, time seemed to stop. Deep within my being, something heard. Though I did not understand completely, I knew that what she spoke was truth. My knees grew weak and my heart beat fast. I wanted to trust both her and the moment, yet in my confusion, I did neither. As my mind acknowledged a situation obviously out of hand, my lips raced on with senseless questions:

'But what is it really ...What does it mean? How can I...? She stretched forth a hand more wrinkled than her face, yet equally as wise. Grasping my arm, she halted my stammer in mid-sentence. Smiling, she leaned close and spoke again:

'It is *you*. It is your very own self ...that is the what ...and as for the how, let's just say that you have to let go in order to go. *AsSalaamu alaikum*.'

She translated before I could ask:

'Peace be on you, young man. It means the peace of God, Who is Peace Himself, be upon you.'

Gesturing for my assistance, she raised herself to her feet and nodded towards the wall:

'You'll see ...God willing you'll see. You'll find it all in that. It's called the *Kalima*.'

In those moments with Sister Majeed, there came a great initiation. My being itself witnessed the love-woven beauty of every woman I'd ever known as a teacher. I felt, I remembered, I realised the mercy of some unknown

cherishing force reflected in my mother; grandmother; first-grade teacher; the lady across the street who gave me cookies for running errands; and the girl next door who struck me dumb with my first conscious feelings of love. All of them were there, clear in that moment, collected in the old woman's face. A great fragmentation began to unify and days from closed, senseless years of my past opened up to yield new meanings. Partly stunned, and deeply touched by the old woman's loving presence, I accepted her prescription without knowledge of its depth or its scope. I had come to find the strange inscription stretched across the wall, only to leave with its mystery slowly stretching across my mind: *La ilaha ill'Allah*. Such was the introduction of my search to me. The search for the meaning of this timeless phrase was in fact the beginning of my search for myself.

The weeks which followed my meeting with Sister Majeed often found me alone, deep in quiet interaction with myself. Still unable to make sense of the encounter, I had launched several fruitless attempts to deny it. Yet so strongly had my consciousness been gripped by the episode, I accepted at last that I had to know more. With unexpected suddenness, a major turning-point arrived in my life. I took a step forward on an unknown path. And so it was I returned to the Mosque, and grew to know Sister Majeed. Truly, as the saying goes: 'To know her was to love her.'

So disarmingly beautiful was her wisdom-lit soul, one felt helpless to do otherwise. There was a kind of vibrant magnetism in her state of surrender, some effulgent

tranquillity which tapped my own deep inward longing, and drew me closer to myself.

The bearded old man became my first formal teacher after Sister Majeed. He too had his beauty. His speech was alert and full of colourful analogy, with wit and humour and depth. His manner was absorbing. At first his words seemed like much of what I'd heard in the past: rituals, rites, and doctrinal laws. All the things I associated with organised religion which simply failed to touch me deep inside, much as I hoped that something would. None the less, I had to admit that there was something different here, something which I sensed might involve me perhaps, in an exciting new direction.

I came several times before the old man talked to me, save for a simple greeting. I would come with pad and pencil, and I wrote everything. I collected painstakingly copious notes and studied the ideas. I overflowed with questions. After a time, I felt myself ready enough — nay, armed enough — to attempt to speak. To my surprise, the old man heard my questions. But more than this, he attempted to answer them, then challenged me and raised more questions. He sent me in search of answers and directed me to read, to think and understand. Never before in matters of religion and faith had I known a teacher such as this.

We spent long hours in that old building, the *Imam* and me. Often there were just the two of us. We would sit in the old kitchen in the back of the building, drinking coffee and talking about Islam. Other times we'd sit upstairs in the prayer room and talk about God, Whom he referred to as Allah. It was in that room that I began to understand, at the

level of practice, what is meant by the act of surrender. I got down on my knees and laid my head on the floor before the Lord of the Universe. With tears flowing and my body shaking with a nervousness which rose up from some unknown inner place, I looked into oblivion. I muttered a phrase which was so foreign to me then, but which now feels just like home: *Subhana Rabbi al 'ala*. Glory to my Lord, Most High.

For the next several years I was a student in both my practical and spiritual life. During these years I was devoted to the *Imam*, and under his direction I grew clearer in my search. From him I learned the fundamentals: something of the Oneness of God most High, of the Unity of His Message in all the Revealed Books and the Brotherhood of Prophets, of Life after Death, and of Angels. Something I learned as well, of the nature of the human soul and the duties of a servant of God. I learned something of prayer (*salat*) and almsgiving (*zakat*), fasting (*saum*) and pilgrimage (*Hajj*). During these times came my first lessons of discipleship, by the guidance of God, manifested in the wise and loving care of Sister Majeed, the *Imam*, and the many others who touched my life. The years sped by, and there came the day when I knew I had to leave. The first stage of my practical education was completed now and it was time for me to move. It was a hard move to make. I had become very attached to the Mosque, to the *Imam* and to that particular community of Muslims.

I made the separation, and struck out on my own. Having been offered a job in another city, I made a move to get away and see the world. For three years life was wonderful. I had every kind of success, especially in terms of

professional influence and recognition. Somehow though, I was not happy. I wanted a spiritual life but I did not see how I could have such a life without giving something up. Bored and scared, I made another move. Poorly considered, and poorly timed, my attempt to escape soon resulted in a catastrophic crash. After three months I was on the street with nothing. Beset by what seemed an endless series of problems, I was forced by my suffering to examine my life and turn my attention again back towards my Creator.

I eventually found another job, a modest, simple one, with none of the former frills. Just after I took the job I came across a Middle Eastern journal which was soliciting papers for a conference. I thought I had expertise in one of the areas for which abstracts were being considered, so I wrote. After quite some time I received a long-distance phone-call. In a businesslike tone the caller told me:

‘Brother, I have been requested to inform you that your paper has been accepted. Can you prepare to present it in Saudi Arabia? Your tickets for air travel will be sent to you by mail and your visa will be taken care of by us.’

Astonished, I accepted and hung up the phone. Within a month I had received the visa and tickets and sat aboard the plane.

The conference was a source of many blessings. My paper was well-received and I gained a great deal of insight. I met many other beautiful God-conscious thinkers who taught me many things. A very important part of these learnings was how to move towards integrating all the aspects of my life: the practical, professional and spiritual. Indeed the counsel I received was more than welcomed. By that time I had grown very tired of attempting to live my

life maintaining the straining separations. Among the varied experiences of the conference, I also learned about another quite personal and unseen attachment. It had to do with the Mosque of my home town and the old man, the *Imam*. Somehow I had always felt an allegiance to that particular group and city. During the conference I was speaking about my hopes and concerns to an older Muslim man I had met. He listened, then calmly looked at me and said: 'Don't you see, my brother? Allah has brought you here in order that you may realise that you are a citizen of the planet. Your family is everywhere.'

The words fell on my ears as if I were a deaf man restored to hearing. I had never considered my life so broadly before. With this answer another question came to clarity as well, concerning teachers and *Imams*. I had viewed the *Imam* as a kind of *Shaikh*, or master teacher. Somehow, I felt obliged not to seek another teacher because of my loyalty to him — yet much as I loved him, I knew that what I sought in my heart was not with him. The older seeker clarified the essential issue. He explained that a person can easily be someone's *Imam* — that is, one's leader in exoteric matters of religious practice — and not necessarily his

Shaikh, or spiritual director and guide in more inwardly focused esoteric matters of spiritual purification and growth. I attributed too much to the *Imam* because he had been my first formal teacher after Sister Majeed. When I learned that I had done this, I was very much relieved. At the same time, I continued to hold a very special place in my heart for him. The Prophet Muhammad himself, peace be upon him, said: 'Be most humble and respectful to

persons from whom you receive knowledge.' Also his companion, Ali, may God be pleased with him, said: 'I am a slave to the person who has taught me even a single word. He may sell me or set me free.' And so it was that during the conference many dark, unanswered questions had unexpectedly come to light. As I reflected on being there and all the many things I learned, I realised more and more about the mercy of God. I truly felt His unseen care. From one side of the world to the other, I looked backwards on my life. I saw that God had loved me even through my foolish days, and that He kept my heart alive. I had been lost it is true, but I never rejected Him, and the inward seeking was always there.

As I made my way about the conference I met another helper-guide whose name was Ibrahim. Somehow God caused us to be drawn together and we soon began to talk. Ibrahim knew many of the people at the conference, and he took it upon himself to take me around and introduce me to as many of those present as he could. The interesting people that I met through the efforts of this gregarious brother is a story in itself. Early in our rounds we came upon a man from Turkey:

'Here is someone whom you must speak to,' said Ibrahim smiling, 'but when I leave you, beware of this brother, for he may talk to you in *Sufi* talk. But Allah knows, you should have exposure to his views.'

Having made this baffling remark, Ibrahim departed. I stood there, momentarily absorbed in an attempt to decipher the meaning of what he had said. I had read the works of some of the great Sufis and had always been moved by their beauty and depth.

I saw in them the most beautiful among Muslims and secretly I had always hoped that I might join their ranks. What was it in Ibrahim's statement which triggered such defensiveness in me? Suddenly the stranger's voice interrupted my thoughts and brought me back to the moment:

'AsSalaamu alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa barakatu.
Peace be on you, the mercy of God and His blessings.'

The brother stranger was looking directly into my face. His own was a kind face and his eyes were moist and full of light. The simplicity of his dress and manner belied his inner depth. I extended my hand to shake his, but he took my hand and kissed it instead. Then, stepping closer, he touched my face and kissed my forehead. He continued speaking:

'Let us move to another place; I have much to tell you.'

We moved from the narrow corridor to a quiet, lighted area of the lobby where we stood together. Actually, there was no need to talk. Something in this person reached to my very depths. He touched upon my own deep longing for something which cannot be described by words. This man, a stranger whom I'd never met or seen before was a true spiritual friend. His presence was a great affirmation of hope. Speaking again he said:

'I have been sent to you by Grandshaikh Abdullah Daghistani the Shaikh of my spiritual Master, Shaikh Nun of Kibrus. As the Grandshaikh is now in the better world, when you wish to know more about him, I suggest you contact Shaikh Nun. The Grandshaikh has told me that you

will find the Shaikh you long for, and many other things as well.'

I began to weep. The more he spoke, the more I wept. He told me many things. He spoke of God, of Prophet Muhammad and the brotherhood of Prophets (peace be upon them), of the way of Islam as surrender to God, and of the orientations of seekers, whom he divided into two classes: those who pursue only the external, largely through ritual and form, whom he termed the 'Outers', and those who go through the ritual and form in order to reach the oceans of meaning, whom he referred to as the 'Inners'. I continued weeping. What I heard and felt, moved me beyond words and touched some deep and unknown place in my heart. The love and truth which vibrated in the stranger were more than my mind could fathom, but somehow my heart understood.

During the Stranger's visit he presented me with a photograph of the noble Grandshaikh who had lived to be 120 years of age. I was very much struck by the lighted face of this man, who reached out to me from another world, and through the dervish, entered my life. I took the photo and put it away but having it was always a reminder that what my heart had known was real.

The Stranger stayed with me for the duration of the conference. We attended meetings together, and visited others who had presented papers. We left the conference together and travelled to the Holy City of *Medina*. There we visited the Prophet's Mosque, the gravesite of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and of his beloved companions Abu Bakr Siddiq and Umar Ibn Khattab, both buried beside him, may God be pleased with them.

This visit was of special meaning and importance, the realisation of which was to come much later. Here was established a city of surrender wherein was found the highest, most elevated community of servants of God ever to exist. There in the Mosque of *Medina*, I was privileged to pray in the *mihrab* (alcove) where the Prophet used to pray — a fitting place to remember my smallness and to pray to God that I might be among those who are truly with his Prophet. It was a fitting place indeed to reflect on the hope that my own being might in some way become as surrendered to God as were all of His Prophets, and that my own heart might become as full of love and light as had been *Medina*

al-Munawwara, the City of Illumination.

We continued to the Holy City of Mecca where God graced my eyes with the sight of His ancient house the Ka'bah, erected by Prophet Adam and later Prophet Abraham, peace be upon them. We performed the rites for the lesser pilgrimage (*Umra*) and bade each other farewell in Mecca. My Stranger friend was the personification of the vibrant *sPirit* of brotherhood which I felt everywhere around us. Needless to say, when I left him, I was so full of joy that I could hardly contain myself. I felt extremely blessed to have had a guide and companion through the most holy cities on God's planet earth. As I boarded a bus in Mecca I reflected on my home. The world seemed smaller then.

During the return flight home, I became very sick. I lost all equilibrium and I could not eat or drink. I spent most of the journey back to the United States on my back, stretched across two seats of the jumbo plane. I arrived home still

very sick and remained in bed for two weeks before I felt strong enough to return to work. During my illness I received several friendly and unsolicited diagnoses of jet lag. I resisted these to no end, but actually they were not far off. Now, looking back on the sickness I would myself diagnose what I had as a spiritual jet lag. My illness was alerting me to the big transition into which my life had come. The sickness also told me clearly where I'd be if I went back to where I had been in my past. In the weeks after my return from the journey, and after my recovery, a yearning took hold of me, the likes of which I had never felt before. Nothing seemed to satisfy. Suddenly it became very difficult to continue working. I reported each day with deep melancholy. I spoke very little and became very distant to everyone. Away from work, I went into seclusion. The yearning stayed and stayed. I relived the journey again and again. After several weeks in this state, I decided to visit my family: particularly my mother, whom I'd not seen for several months. Sitting with her in the kitchen I told the story of my restless inward search. Her only words were these:

'Trust God, He knows what you're to do.'

As the writing on the wall stretched across the years, the quiet yearning feeling which had welled up in my travels grew stronger still within. With a strengthened commitment to fulfilling this unknown inner longing, I worked to turn my life back to God.

During the time of my turning, the months passed by like an endless train. Each day was a slow-moving boxcar in which I paced back and forth, in search of a meaning for what I had lived. Finding no answer, I bided my time and

realised that I might search for years. One day, as I stood in the corridor of the building where I worked, a man walked by whom I did not know. I was introducing myself to someone else as he passed by, and he overheard me say my name. Hardly stopping, he commented in a matter-of-fact and casual voice, just loud enough for me to hear: 'Your name is not an American name.'

Partly surprised and partly amused, I regained my composure enough to address him. 'And what is your name?' I quizzically asked.

'Salah,' he replied with a smile.

Now understanding, I was almost in laughter, while together in near unison, we exchanged the greetings of peace (*salaams*).

It was through this man Salah that I was led to the Muslim community of my new city. Viewing my meeting with him in the context of my changing life, I felt compelled to take some initiative consistent with my renewed commitment. I had been in the city for nearly a year without having met a single Muslim. Following his lead, I came into a large but developing community of Muslims. There was much work to be done and sooner than I expected my small initiative caused my life to be filled with activity.

This period of my life was a time of much transition and personal learning. Many of the things I had learned in my early days at the Mosque resurfaced. Whenever possible, I shared them in the service of others. Throughout this time of activity, however, that yearning still remained. I stole away for silence whenever I could to reflect on my life and

stay in touch with myself. I asked my Lord to forgive my past and I prayed for future guidance.

The new community of which I had become a part was very much in need of leadership. A few sincere workers bore the load of many. I learned, however, that a highly qualified and deeply religious man had recently entered the community. Among some there was already the expectant hope that he might become a new force in the strengthening of local Muslims. One of the more active and informed brothers of the community had given me this news. He had also shown me a simple business card on which was written the name of the man and the name of a particular place, a part of which included the word Sufi. Perhaps I was entering another cycle. I thought a thousand hopeful thoughts, then put them all aside. I thought it wiser to be patient and wait to see what might unfold.

Early one evening in *Ramadan*, the fasting month, just after the prayer at sunset, I received a phone-call. The brother who had told me about the new religious leader invited me to a meeting for an introduction. It was planned that we would come together about an hour before a larger gathering of the community for *If-*

tar, the breaking of the fast. When I arrived at the meeting-place, no one from the group was there. I searched for the brother who had called me but I did not find him either. When he finally did arrive, the time which we had planned for was lost, and others from the community had begun to arrive for the gathering.

I accepted the events calmly, thinking, 'The Praise is to God,

Alhamdulillah! I was so patient in the handling of this episode that I even surprised myself. As I stood there still concluding my thoughts on the unmet meeting, someone approached me and asked me to go outside and help to bring in the food.

As I turned to walk back to the building, I caught a glimpse of a man just stepping inside. Something struck me about him and gave me the sense that he was the person I was to have met. When I re-entered the room of the gathering, I found that several people had arrived and were moving about. In one area of the room I immediately noticed the man I had seen. He was dressed in simple white clothing, and he wore sandals and a strikingly plain, light-brown pointed hat. Over his shoulders was draped a long, black, cape-like garment. He sat with a small circle of people gathered around him who moved whenever he moved. I could easily see that they all were with him and not with the gathering at large. There was in the presence of this man, a kind of beauty, spiritual nobility and vibrating personal magnetism which I had not felt in anyone since the death of Sister Majeed. I sensed a great depth in him and great love. There was balance in his movement and a mystery in his manner which created in me a sense of harmony and discomfort, both at once. For those who were around him, he was obviously present, and yet he seemed inconspicuous for the larger group. When he looked at me, it was as if there was no one but us two. Something in his glance went straight to my heart and pulled me in his direction. I knew he was my Shaikh. He rose as I approached him with the greeting of peace and calmly he

returned the greeting. As I stood before him nearly breathless, I introduced myself and extended my hand.

‘I am Muhyiddin,’ I said.

Not taking my hand, he put his to my beard, and grasping it, he said, ‘I know who you are.’ Then he gave me his name.

He looked into my eyes and in the moment a thousand days raced by. He kissed my face on either cheek and the voice of the Stranger I had met in my travels suddenly came up in my memory like a flashing light. With dramatic suddenness, this rare human being stepped into my life. Full and almost overwhelmed, I could hardly believe what was happening. Not really knowing what to do, I sat near him in silence like those in the circle, then I moved about the room.

Later that evening he spoke before the larger gathering on the meaning of *Ramadan* and fasting. His talk brought many teachings from the Qur’an and the traditions. It was eye-opening, to the point, and hard to ignore. Afterwards, the man who had called on the phone introduced us again and our meeting was rescheduled. Everything seemed to come together that night. This gathering only marked the beginning of many new things that were yet to come. In the years ahead I would come to know in my life, things which I had only read in books before. And so it was that almost nine years after I had stumbled into the mosque and looked into the wisdom-worn face of Sister Majeed, I peered into the knowing, loving face of my Shaikh. I saw reflected in him the light of Sister Majeed and every teacher I had known before. That night before leaving, the Shaikh asked me if I could give him a ride on Sunday to come. We would

go to the rescheduled meeting together. I agreed to do it even though I had no car, my own being in repair. It was easy enough to borrow a car, and to keep the appointment which I had hoped for so much, over the many endless months.

Having been brought to my Shaikh by the Grace of God, I acknowledged the great blessing of his coming as a guide. The true ones of God are rare as the phoenix, and the world is full of false teachers. Yet one must have help on the way to God, for without a guide the ego cannot be dissolved, nor will selfishness die. As I quietly reflected on the guidance of all my past years come to the present, the signs of the moment were clear. In my heart I knew that the Shaikh was true and I prayed that with him I would move closer to myself and my Lord.